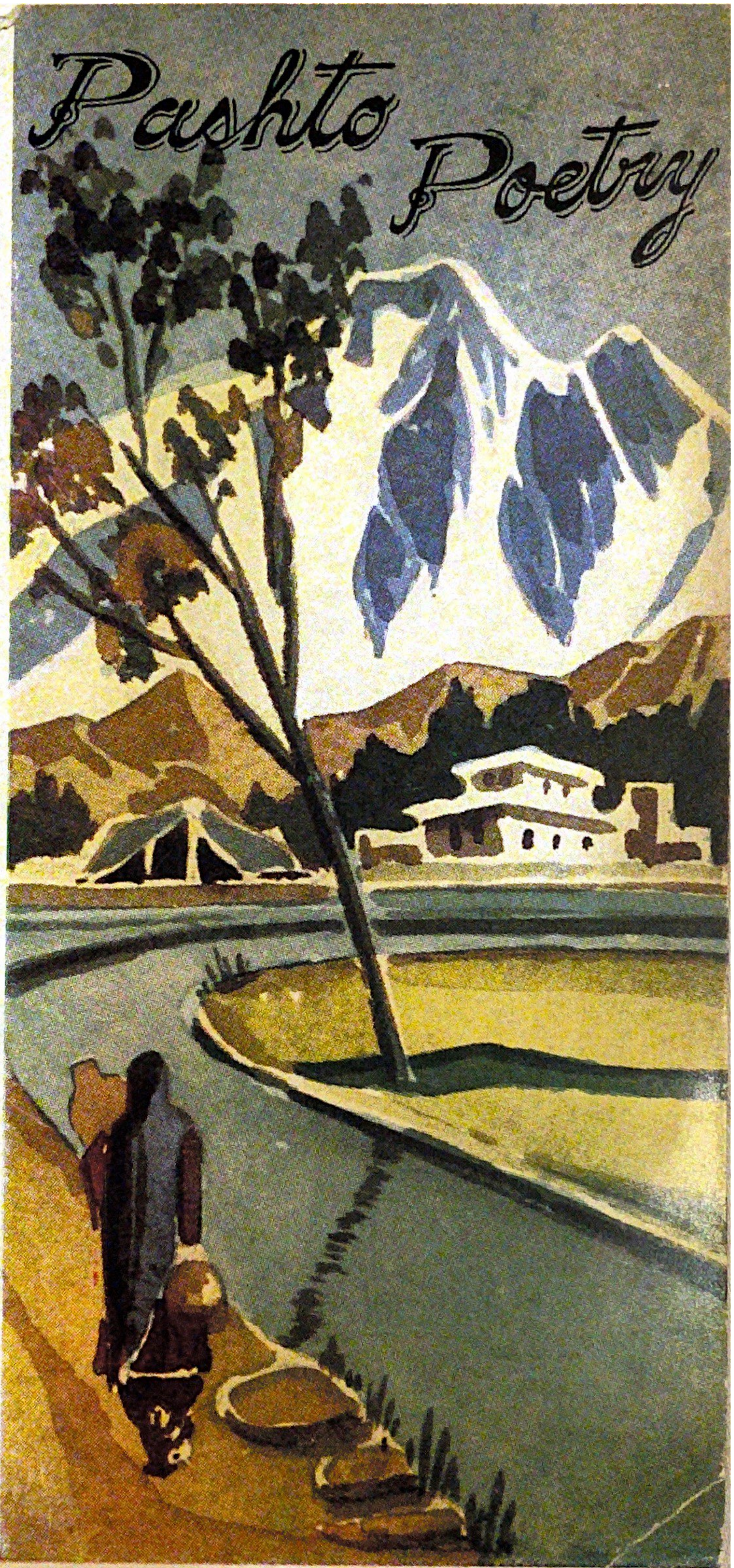
Pashto Poetry



Pashto poetry is the natural product of a culture with a rich and vigorous oral tradition. While its early remnants are minimal (although scholars are hoping for further discoveries as literary criticism advances), even these fragments reveal the powerful imagery and creative style that still predominates centuries later despite the refinements of other poetic systems. Pashto poetry was, and emains, the embodiment of the vital tribal spirit of a proud and resourceful people.

ANCIENT PERIOD: ? To 600 H.

No documentation of its development exists, for when Pashto poetry first appears on the literary horizon at the beginning of the Islamic era, it already evidences a high state of maturity, an evaluation which a reading of those pure, flowing verses which, fortunately, have come down to us from that period immediately confirms. The earliest known Pashto poetic work dates form the second century Hegra and is attributed to second century Hegra and is attributed to Amir Kror, a Ghori chieftain. His poetry, then, inaugurates the so-called Ancient Period, which extends until 600 H.

During these early centuries, Pashto poetry was lucid, natural in form, free and melodious of verse, and exhibited relatively little of the influence of foreign cultures. It gaves expression to heroic epics, paeans of praise of family and tribe, and hymns of love of God as the creator of the universe —in short, topics with which the first poetry of every people has dealt.

Our first recorded poet, Amir Kror, son of Amir Polad Suri, became the Amir of Manesh of Ghor in 139 H., taking the title "Jahan Pahlawan" (Hero of the World). His epic poem, was included in the Book of Pashto poets "Pota Khazana" (The Hidden Treasure), and we note here its first and last stanzas:

I am a lion;
In this world exists no hero greater than I
Not in India, nor in Sind, nor in Tukhar, nor in Kabul.
Not even in Zabul
Does anyone surpass my strength.
The high mountains obey me without delay;
This world is mine indeed.
My name is eulogised from the pulpits,
For the days, the nights, the months, and the years
Have seen no greater hero than I.

Single poems have also come down to us from a Loyak ruler of Ghazna and Gardez in 163 H. and also from Abdul Mohammad Hashim Sarwani (229-297 H.), the son of Zaid Sarwani, although his was only a Pashto translation of an Arabic poem by Ibn Khallad. Other ancient poems from two members of the ruling Lodi dynasty of Multan date back to the fourth century Hegra when Sheikh Razi, the nephew of Sheikh Hamid, the first king of the dynasty, was preaching Islam in the Suleiman Mountains, Razi sent a Pashto poem to Naser, Hamid's suc-

cessor, who replied in kind—a type of poetic exchange known in Pashto as "parki".

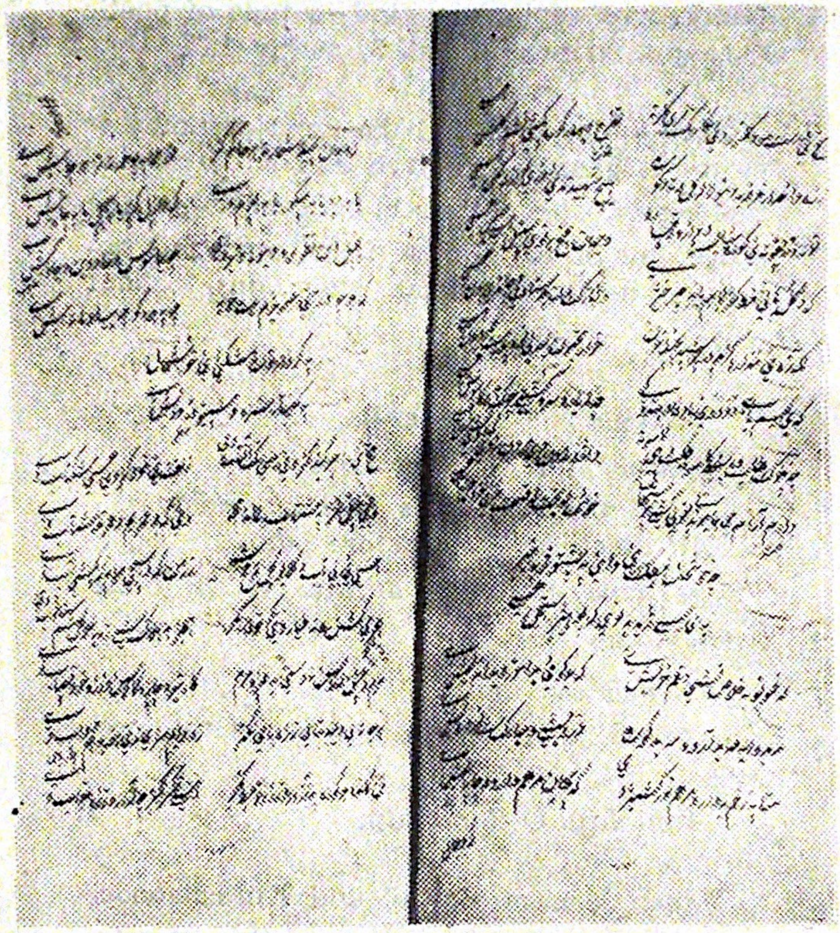
Sheikh Baitni, called the great-grandfather of the Afghans, also lived and wrote during this period. This patriarch, believed to be the progenitor of the Ghilzai tribe, made his home within the Suleiman Mountains, about which he writes:

Almighey, O Almighty,
Everywhere in your love
Stand the mountains clad in grandeur.
All creatures bow before you,
As have we, here, at the foot of these mountains
Pitched our tents.
O God! increase the number of this people,
Almighty, O Almighty,

Ismail, son of Baitni, and Khrashaboon, son of Sarban, both members of this ancestral family, were also poets of this period.

After 400 H., however, the influence of the Khorasani-Islamic culture made itself felt on Pashto literature, most notably through the court of Sultan Mahmud at Ghazni, and the seeds of change were planted which were to bloom so fruitfully during the Middle Period.

During this transitional period, the Suri dynasty of Ghor ruled the heart of Afghanistan from its court in Ahangaran. When,



Colection of Poems by Khoshal Afghan
Script: Pushto, Nastaliq
Paper: Khokandi
Scribe: Unknown
Year: 1142

in 405 H., its leader Amir Mohammad Suri was improsoned after an attack by Mahmood of Ghazni and subsequently poisoned himself in despondence, his son Sheikh As'ad (d. 425 H.) eulogized the former Amir in a poem which is still remembered. Also of the same court was Khakarandoy Ghori, son of Ahmad-

i Kotwal, who lived in Ghor around 580 H., and eulogized the conquests of Sultan Muizuddin Ghori, the second conqueror of India after Sultan Mahmood. Both poems rank high in Pashto literature, and their fluency and imagery compare favorably with the work of such Dari poets of the Ghaznavid court as Unsari and Farrukhi.

Other poets include Sheikh Theiman, who lived around 550 H.; Malikyar Gharsheen, who wrote one of the great Pashto epics while campaigning in India in 580 H. with Sultan Muizuddin Ghori; Taimani, who lived in Ghor around 580 H. and eulogized Sultan Giasuddin Ghori; and a famous saint, Qutbuddin, son of Ahmad Alias Bakhtayar, who lived in Delhi around 600 H.

Malikyar Gharsheen, lived in the Tarnak valley of Zabulistan. In one of his Lyrics he has addressed the river Tarnak, complaining of separation:

The Tarnak is flowing,
If flowing from bank to bank,
Where stands my heart
Yearning stand my heart
O river O river,
O river, Tarnak,
May God thus parch your flow
And grant my heart
Love's union.
Take my message,
O bright moon,
And tell her that the Tarnak's flood
Deprives me of her kiss.

O people cry out—where is Hotak?
army?

For Malikyar is languishing,
Separated from his love;
Let him reach her side.

MIDDLE PERIOD: 600 to 1000 H.

The Middle Period, which begins in 600 H. was typified by the entrance of mysticism and religious thought into the sphere of poetic concern. Oneness of God, divine beauty, and man's spiritual position in nature became themes for the versifiers, and Persian mystics were also translated at this time in this regard.

Then, around 618 H., came the hordes of Ghenghiz Khan with the resulting wake of destruction which sent the Pashtoon nation into refuge in the mountain fastnesses. Understandably, the poetry of the next several centuries bespeaks a spirit of resistance, a resolve to struggle against the aggressors, and a determination to save and protect the motherland and the national honor. These are the themes most readily associated with Pashto poetry today, although this era also saw moral, romantic, and lyric poetry secure its place in the Pashto poetic pantheon. Poetry of the Middle Period was generally limited to qasida, mansnavi, and some special melodic forms.

The most famous poets of the period were Sheikh Mati (623-688 H.), son of Abas of the Ghoriakhel and a poet of aesthetics, Baba Hotak (661-740 H.), who spent his life in and the Tarnak valley leading the people aga-

inst Chenghiz Khan's successors and authoring an epic poem urging young men to the front lines to preserve the motherland; his son Sheigh Malikyar Hotak (b 715 H.); and Sultan Bahlol Lodi (d. 894 H.), son of Sepahsalar Malik Kala Lodi, who in 855 H. ascended the throne of Dehli and established the Royal Lodi dynasty in India to become another of the Pashtoon scholar-kings.

In addition, three women poets were especially honored for, among their other writings, their moral sermons: Zarghoona Kakar (c. 900 H.), Mairwan Nekakhta Mamozai (c. 960 H.), and Rabia (c. 920 H.), The latter wrote:

Man was brought down to earth
And burnt inside with flames of sorrow.
God has created a hell on the face of the earth
And given it a name—separation.

MODERN PERIOD: 1000 H. to the Present.

Early in the 1000's H., the modern period began, and the lyric, large anthlogies of which were collected, gained in importance. Moreover, such verse forms as the rubai', takhnis tasdis, tarj'i, and tarkib also became common. The range of subject matter also widened to include epistomology, religion, morality, satire, legends, and history, while the emulation of Persian-language poets, especially in the writing of ghazals or qasida, flourished. The mystic spirit prevading the ghazal in Persian was transferred to the ghazal in Pashto, and thus, through this and other similar graftings, Pashto poetry, which

had followed its own fairly independent style in the Ancient and Middle Periods, acquired a more general, Asiatic character.

In the earlier periods, Pashto poetry had been touchstoned by realism, while the new period brought with it traces of idealistic thought. The poet, no longer bound to the demonstrable, was released to soar into the empyrean, attaining supernatural heights and peopling his utopia with romance and love. Some of the earlier characteristics were preserved, of course, and the essential integrity of Pashto exprssion remained unchanged.

Within this period, at the beginning of the 12th century H., a separate school developed involving the use of words and interpretations from Dari literature of the Indian style. And, in effect, several poets of unusual creative power and imagination at this time forged from their style a distinct branch of Pashto poetry and literature.

During the 11th and 12th centuries of Hegra, the Pashto language was promoted strongly, especially under the Hotakis of Kandahar and Ahmad Shah the Great, who found it most valuable in uniting the people. A great school of Pashto epic writers rose up to help strengthen the spirit of resistance against colonization by, among others such dybehind the men in this respect, for they must nasties as the Moghuls of India and the Safavids of Pars. Nor did the Afghan women lag be numbered among the most effective poets

of this time. ollowing, then, are some of the major poetic figures of the Modern Period, along with samples of their work:

Khushal Khan Khattak (The Man of Sword and Pen), who died in 1100 H., is perhaps one of the most widely read and revered of the Pashto poets. This warrior-poet, born the son of a chief of the Khattak tribe living between Peshawar and the confluence of the Indus and Kabul Rivers, was at one and the same time a poet, writer, scholar, philosopher, and soldier. He wrote with unequalled vividness in many forms on patriotism, romance, morality, social science, etc., and in Persian and Hindi as well as in Pashto. He struggled long and hard for Afghan independence against India's great emperor Aurangzeb and was imprisoned for many years.

I.
At everything I look, I behold that face
Which, from too much visibility, has become invisible.
Be it mosque or monastery,
Both are one-nothing in alien;
For when I look deeply and with care,
I find in everything—oneness.

II.
When the flowers bloomed in the garden,
My love came to me,
Though I had vowed to drink no more.
Yet she, with her sweet caresses,
Made me drink again.
Now Nauroz and Id have come
And the cup is laughing and the chaghana is weeping.



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Mullah Wali
1225



Divan of Rahman Baba
Author: Abdurahman son of Abdusatar, 1042-1118 A.H.
Calligrapher: Mullah Wali
Date: 1225

Arise, O Saki, and give me wine;

It is time to break the vow—my heart desires to drink.

III.

I have girthed my sword to protect the honor of the Afghans;

I am Khushal Khattack, the brave man of the age.

Most of Khushal's sons, a daughter, and grandsons were also poets and writers, among them was Abdu Kadir Khan (1063-1118 H.), who followed his father both as chief of the clan and as one of its best poets. Ashraf Khan Hijri, son of Khushal Khan, was captured in 1093 H. During one of his many Afghan nationalist thrusts against Aurangzeb. His poetry, which comes for the most part from his 10 years' imprisonment, is romantic, moralistic, and patriotic, and is expressed as rubai, mukhamas and qit'aa:

A wise man walks unconcerned with the affairs of this world,

For life's cares are like the wind,

And its happiness like the mist—forever fleeting.

O Darvesh! think not my sighs and tears are false,

For the eyes weep only when the heart is touched.

A free man, knowing the fickleness of earthly things.

Bows neither to strength nor wealth.

Kazem Shayda (b. 1140 H.), the grandson of Ashraf Khan and the son of Afzal Khan, is one of the stylistic giants of Pashto poetry. He died in exile in Kashmir after having produced a collection of 4000 verses. Like Mirza Bedil, a Dari poet of the Indian style, Shayda used delicate images, metaphors, and similes, and pioneered the bold usage of the Pashto language in artistic styles which had previously been ignored. Like Abu Navas, the Arab poet who had been using words and interpretations from Dari, Shayda introduced the same into Pashto. His fertile imagination and immense creativity are obvious in his verses:

I.

O Shayda! always fear the tear-stained eye,

For is it not the drops of cloud
Which form, at last, the flood?

II.

I would not climb the sky with the lasso of the sun,

And I am not, like the dew, a burden on the flowers.

Abdur Rahman (1042-1118 H.), son of Abdul Satar of the Pashtoon Mohamand tribe, achieved a status closely akin to a national father among the Afghans, and only Khushal ranks higher than he in terms of influence and greatness. He is called Rahman "Baba", primarily out of respect for his lucid poetry and profound spiritual thought. His collection of poems, in which lyrics

predominates, is a popular among the Pashtoons as is that of Khwaja Hafiz among Dari speakers and has been used as a teaching text for Afghan women. Dari poets, in their Sufist poetry, call love the orbit of the world, and Rahman Baba, as a mature Sufi, says:

God has created this world from the love,
The father of all creatures.

Abdul Hamid Mohmand (110-1150 H.), Kazem Shayda, was a pioneer in the introduction of the Indian style of Dari literature into Pashto poetry. This member of the Mashukhail tribe of the Mohmand clan, however, differed from Shayda in his championing of the Indian style without a correspondingly heavy reliance on Dari vocabulary; he was also more faithful to standard Pashto rules of scansion. His stylistic creativity and and delicate imagination have secured him a seat among the greats of Pashto literature.

This is not my poem,
But the blood of a wounded heart,
Or a soul newly-flown from the dead,
Or a song half-strangled from a bird,
Or the beautiful Lyla-riddle of Majnon,
Or an ever-swelling river of blood,
Or an army come afresh from a wondrous city.

Ahmad Shah Abdali (1135-1186 H.) became King of Afghanistan before a national "Loya Jerga" in Kandahar in 1160 H. As a conqueror, his reign extended over present-day Afghanistan, Khurasan, Punjab, Sind, and Kashmir, and he launched nine campaigns into India, after the last of which, in 1174 H. he bestowed Dehli's throne on the Moghul King Shah Alam.

Thus, a politician and national personality, this son of Zaman Khan and descendent of the Sadozai rulers of Herat was also a poet, in both Pashto and Dari. His poetry deals with morality, bravery, patriotism, and love of God, and the thinking and expressions of Sufism are clearly evident in his writings. Ever the Islamic conqueror, he was also always the Afghan nationalist:

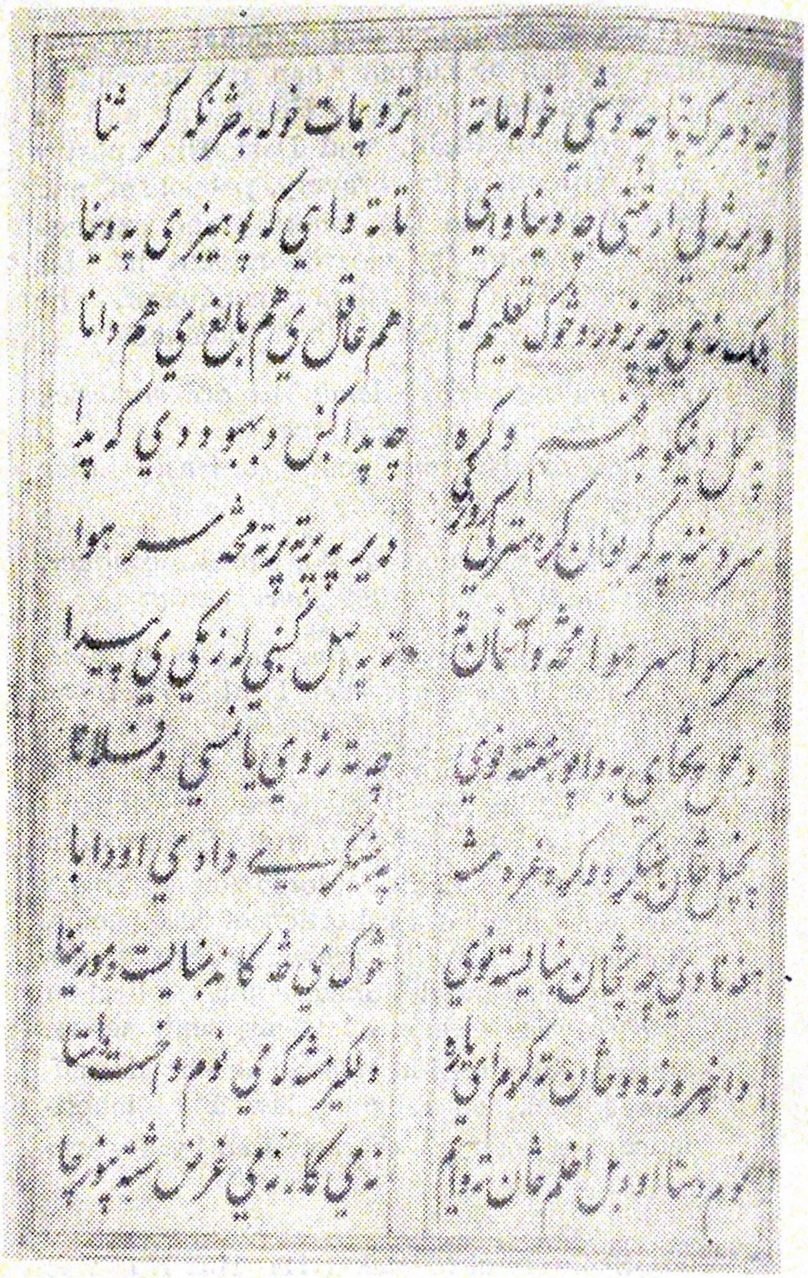
Thou my native land; All are homesick with the pain of your love;
This is why our youth so freely give their lives.

Indeed, whatever of the world I conquer,
Yet shall I not forget your beauty;

And remembering your lofty mountains,
I would denounce even Dehli's greatness.

Two Kandahari poets of the Kakar tribe writing during this time were Pir Mohammad Kakar (b. 1130 H.) and Shamsuddin Kakar. Pir Mohammad tutored Ahmad Shah's sons and compiled a collection of 5000 poems, completed in 1196 H., which reflects a mature, masterful style. Shamsuddin's collection of 7000 lyrics, elegies, quatrains, pentameters, etc. was completed in 1238 H., and he also authored books on religious law and inheritance. His poetry is characterised by a warm sense of love.

Shah Husain Hotak (1114- 1152 H.) was given the throne at Kandahar when his brother Shah Mahmud conquered Isfahan, the then capital of Persia, Both were the sons of the Afghan national leader Haji Mir Wais Khan Hotak. Shah Husain's court in Kandahar was one of poets and writers until 1150



Script: Pushto, Nastaliq.
Scribe: Unknown

H., when, after a siege, Shah Husain was captured by Nadir Afshar and banished to Mazindaran, where he was poisoned two years later;

My beloved for the sake of God
Look my way but once.
I am injured; I am stained with blood;
I am mocked and scorned by all.
I am perplexed by love.
I, the King—Husain Hotak, a begger at your door!

Of the women poets writing in Pashto during the period from 1000 to 1300 H., the most famous are both from the family of Mir Wais Khan. Mrs. Mazo Tokhi, the daughter of Sultan Malikkhail and the daughter of Mir Wais Khan, lived in Kandahar around 1120 H. This woman of high ideals and aspirations was a wise and diligent scholar.

The eye of the marcissus was mourning wet;
Tears fell drop by drop.
Ah beautiful flower, I cried, why do you weep?
My life is but one mouthful of laughter, it said.

Zainab Hotaki, the daughter of Mir Wais Khan, earned a reputation as a prudent scholar and writer. Her poems on the death of her brother, Shah Mahmud Hotak, are especially impressive and moving:

O people:, cry out-where is Hotak?
O Afghans; where stands your great army?
And where your country, from Isfahan to Farah?
Your great king, where is he?
I say you have lost your greatness:
This is why all Kandahar weeps.

Spina Herawi, the daughter of Noor Mohammad Alikozai, was living description, in a masnav id style, of the city's courageous defense, ranks high among the recent Pashto epics. Within the framework of her verses, she captures the courage and bravery of the Afghan nationalists with both sensitivity and passion.

At the end of the 13th century H., British colonialism moved across the subcontinent of India and reached the borders of Afghanistan, leading, subsequently to the First Anglo-Afghan War in 1840 A.D., followed by the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1878 A.D. Both wars severely damaged the economic and social structures of Afghanistan and hindered the development of art and literature.

Yet during these struggles for freedom and national integrity, the Pashto language, particularly in poetic form, was an important vehicle by which the people were united against British colonial power, and many poets for rallying the people to the holy war were composed in the popular language. In effect, these epics crystalized the spirit of bravery and religious fervour of the Afghan nation. Listen to these words from one such epic in which an Afghan warrior speaks his heart:

O single, everlasting, undying God!
Protect my faith and keep the Farangi (the British) from Kabul.
Except this, I ask no other thing.

And, as we have seen earlier in the period, in times of national crisis, Afghan women were not to be forgotten. In spite of their being veiled and in seclusion to all but their confidantes, Afghan women and young girls joined their man in these wars against the enemy. A popular poet describes this as follows:

No one had seen as much before as even the edge of their scarves,
Yet today these girls walk bareheaded on the banks of the Jam Rud.
Why? Because there is holy war in Kabul.

Compared to that of the Middle Period, then, modern Pashto poetry has extedned its horizons both topically and stylistically, with no diminuation of its natural beauty. It has been characterized by a shift from idealism to realism, and in that respect it clearly captures and conveys the prevailing social spirit. Instead of idealizing love itself, as in the more mystical poetry of the Middle Period, the writers and poets now depict their home and the nation as their beloved.

The last forty years have seen a period of revival and renovation in Pashto literature in which poets have adapted the old forms of lyric, elegy, quatrain, etc. to new purposes. The modern style accepts the traditional frameworks and fills it with new thought. An even more modern school of contemporary poets in Afgha-

nistan is presently developing an experimental style of Afghan poetry. Writing without the old governors of rhyme and meter, this group is expressing its new set of progressive ideas through the medium of free verse. Pushto poetry, then, has a future that promises to be as profound and as diversified as has been the legacy of its past.

By A.H. Habibi



Script: Pushto, Nastaliq.
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